

Wednesday, Apr. 21, 2010

# Man's best friend brings help, smiles

Harrisburg man depends on assistance dog

By Meghan Cooke



Andy Bush, 36, pets his dog Seagar, a trained assistance dog, during a walk near his Harrisburg home. Bush, who suffered a brain injury as a child, received Seagar from Canine Companions for Independence. Meghan Cooke - [macooke@newsocabarrus.com](mailto:macooke@newsocabarrus.com)

## Want to help?

Learn more or donate to Canine Companions for Independence at [www.cci.org](http://www.cci.org).

A little girl tugged on her mom's pants and pointed at the yellow Labrador retriever strolling through a Harrisburg grocery store last week. A curious employee peered over a stack of fruit.

Seagar didn't notice. He was working.

Gloria Bush of Harrisburg pushed her son, Andy, in his wheelchair through the store as Seagar, Andy's trained assistance dog, tagged along.

The Bush family received 2-year-old Seagar in November from Canine Companions for Independence, a nonprofit organization that breeds, trains and places assistance dogs with people with disabilities.

Seagar responds to more than 50 commands. He uses his nose to push round handicapped buttons to open automatic doors when Gloria is pushing Andy's wheelchair, and he even helps take off Andy's socks.

But for Andy, having Seagar around isn't about having a helping hand. It's about having a friend.

"Having Seagar around makes him smile," Gloria said.

When Andy was 2 years old, he snuck out of the house and fell into a construction ditch filled with rainwater as he tried to reach a ball in the water. Gloria found him floating face down. He suffered brain damage as a result of lack of oxygen to the brain.

Now 36 years old, Andy can't do much on his own. He requires help for basic tasks.

"Seagar is the perfect dog for Andy," said Gloria, explaining that Seagar isn't demanding of her time. "He's very giving."

The Bush family was on Canine Companions for Independence's waiting list for two years before Andy, Gloria and her husband, Roy, were invited to the organization's southeast regional center in Orlando, Fla., for a two-week training session in November to learn commands and how to care for Seagar, whom they received for free.

CCI, headquartered in California, gave out more than 240 assistance dogs last year.

Seagar is meant to provide companionship and a means of socialization for Andy, said Martha Johnson, spokeswoman for CCI.

"Sometimes people don't know how to approach Andy," Johnson said. "Having a dog there helps people relate with him. It helps in social settings."

CCI requires annual testing for Seagar to ensure that he's still up for the job. When he's working, Seagar wears a blue vest, and the Bushes are strict with him. When he sniffed at a bag of pretzels in the grocery store, Gloria gave him a gentle tug on his leash to get him back on track.

But when he's not working, he's free to be like any other dog, chasing after his toys and raising eager eyes in hopes of a rub from a friendly hand.

"Visit," Gloria told Seagar as she stood behind Andy recently at their home.

Seagar gently placed his head on Andy's lap, waiting to be petted. Gloria held her son's hand and grazed it across Seagar's head.

"Lap," Gloria said.

Seagar jumped to put his front paws on Andy's lap, drawing a grin from Andy.

Seagar goes out to eat with the Bushes, and goes on walks with them around the Town Center neighborhood in Harrisburg.

He watches from a distance as Andy takes lessons at Wings of Eagles Ranch, a therapeutic horseback riding center in Concord.

Gloria said Andy has been calmer and more content since they brought Seagar home.

When the family went to church, Andy often became restless and had to leave before even making it through one song, Gloria said. Now he sits through the entire service with Seagar by his side.

And Andy responds to his canine friend, Gloria said.

"Where's Seagar?" Gloria asked her son.

Andy glanced around the room and his eyes settled on Seagar sleeping on his pillow on the floor before looking back to his mother.

"There's Seagar."